

Economizing Spoken American English with the /s/ Contraction:
Native Speaker Perceptions of Grammaticality

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the way that the /s/ contraction is used by native English speakers to form grammatically acceptable utterances. The use of the /s/ contraction involves several grammatical features, such as agreement and tense. Whether or not they are aware of these individual features, most native English speakers are able to identify when a sentence is grammatically correct.

This study begins by describing some of the grammatical terminology that characterizes use of the /s/ contraction. While there are extensive textual resources that describe how the /s/ contraction can be used grammatically, or that describe the grammatical features, little research has been done to reflect the way that uses of the /s/ contraction are viewed by native speakers. The second part of this study describes a survey that was given to a group of forty-two native speakers, with high levels of education and living in the same region. The survey asked them to rate the grammaticality of certain phrases containing the /s/ contraction. The data was collected by email during a two-week period, and then the results were empirically analyzed.

The results of this study indicate that this group of participants is in agreement about the grammaticality of most constructions using the /s/ contraction. The most notable finding of this study is that there are particular grammatical features that evoke less agreement, such as uses of the /s/ contraction with some instances of 'there', as a replacement for the third person verb 'has', and also for some instances of reported speech. These categories may indicate an area of spoken English with evolving rules of grammaticality, as English is shaped by its speakers.

Introduction

One of the most common uses of contractions is that of nouns with the /s/ morpheme, which can be used by speakers of English in many ways. It may be combined with a noun or pronoun as a replacement for the verb 'is', such as in the phrase 'he's here'; or it may replace the verb 'has', taking the same form to indicate a different meaning in the phrase 'he's already been here'. In everyday conversation, it is not unusual to hear native speakers of English using the /s/ contraction several times, and in several different ways. The different ways of use may indicate a choice on the part of the speakers, but if this is true, there must be a pattern of how or why it is used in some cases and not in others.

English is not always used in a prescribed manner, whether it is being written or being spoken. The gap between prescription and use is an ever-changing terrain; variations of the English language have been recorded for things such as the evolution of spelling, but there is very little in the literature that describes how native speakers use contractions ungrammatically. Therefore, this study is designed to both look critically at the grammar features that apply and to survey native speakers of English, asking them to rate the grammaticality of various uses of the /s/ contraction. The findings will indicate a spectrum of native speaker perceptions that reflect actual use, rather than just grammatical prescription. Grammaticality, termed "correctness" by Swan (2005), is reasonably important for mutual comprehension, but "it is quite unnecessary to speak or write a language perfectly in order to communicate effectively" (p. 9).

Native speakers are the most logical judges for how English is used, but this label is quite debatable. According to Davies (2003), the term native speaker "refer[s] to people who have a special control over a language, insider knowledge about 'their' language" (p. 1). Davies complicates his definition however, by pointing out that this insider knowledge is not clearly

defined and there is quite a bit of “mystique” surrounding qualities of a native speaker. For the purpose of this study¹, the concept of a person who has “special control over a language” is quite useful because it indicates that these speakers are aware of the way that grammar and grammaticality affect their speech (Davies, 2003). Furthermore, a native speaker, when referred to in this study, should be considered as “one who can lay claim to being a speaker of a language by virtue of place or country of birth,” including those who have moved such a place at a young age (Davies, 2003, p. viii). Therefore, if a person was raised in a country where they spoke English as a child, that person will be referred to as a native speaker of English in this study.

Formality is one factor that may affect use of the /s/ contraction. Most native speakers of English are able to judge the formality of their language according the rules of grammar. In this study, it will be necessary to first describe and define the different grammatical features that are present. Since ‘is’ and ‘has’ are two very commonly reduced verbs, the base forms of each (‘be’ and ‘have’) require close examination. Tense and agreement are also have a grammatical role in the use of /s/ contractions. Additionally, for the purposes of this study, ungrammatical uses of the /s/ contraction, and uses with the word ‘there’ will be explained. Then it will be possible to detect how they are related to the perceived grammaticality of certain phrases containing the /s/ contraction. Whether a phrase is grammatically correct or not may prove to be in the eye of the speaker.

¹ By using the ‘native speaker’ label, many speakers of English are left out, including speakers of English as a second language and bi-dialectal speakers of English. While this measure is taken to narrow the focus on a small number of English speakers, the findings of this study are limited to this small group.

Literature Review

Using contractions in English

Contractions are used in English to improve the efficiency of the language. From the following examples, a native English speaker may choose either option in the same situation:

(1) He's in Colorado right now.

(2) He is in Colorado right now.

By saying 'he's' instead of 'he is' the speaker is eliminating one syllable and yet no meaning is lost. Avoiding contractions can often create speech that sounds formal or stressed. In fact, the speaker may even choose to avoid a contraction if they want to stress the verb in the sentence, as in example (2). This phrase may then represent a clarifying statement to counter the belief that 'he' is not in Colorado and the verb 'is' would then be stressed.

In literature designed for non-native speakers, the role of the contraction has been simplified. *English Club* (2010), a website which contains such materials, provides a list of common contractions in English, such as subjects contracted with /ll/ for 'will', /d/ for 'had' or 'would', and /nt/ for 'not'. This website also indicates that those contractions can also be used with question words (who, what, when, where) as well as 'that', 'here', and 'there'. While this is a more extensive list than that which can be found in other English language learner resources, it still does not provide an explanation for speaker preference. In other words, non-native speakers may discover that they may optionally use contractions, but they are not always taught how this use affects the tone of their language. In the textbook *Grammar Sense 1*, Pavlik (2004) states that "in informal speech [one can use] contractions with nouns + *is* or *are*" (p. 16). *Focus on Grammar 1* (Schoenberg & Mauer, 2006) also makes this claim about informal speech during one of the early chapters; it subsequently presents the contracted forms when possible throughout

the textbook, particularly where a contraction can stand in for 'is' or with the negative 'not':

(3) I'm from Seattle. I'm not from Sydney (Schoenberg & Mauer, 2006, p. 21).

Perhaps the simplest definition of a contraction is: "a short form in which a subject and an auxiliary verb, or an auxiliary verb and the word *not*, are joined together into one word.

Contractions are also made with non-auxiliary *be* and *have*" (Swan, 2005, p.19). As mentioned earlier, both 'be' and 'have' are reduced to the same /s/ contraction to represent the third person, present tense functions of those words: 'is' and 'has'.

Using the contractions with /s/

Native speakers who encounter the /s/ contraction can quickly decipher which verb the /s/ is standing in for ('is' or 'has'), but it is possible to list the rules that govern this almost instantaneous recognition process. On the popular ESL practice website, *Dave's ESL Café*, the difference between /s/ for 'is' and /s/ for 'has' is spelled out in the following way: "In American English, the /s/ generally means 'has' if a past participle follows, but the /s/ means 'is' if a noun phrase, prepositional phrase, adjective, or an -ing verb follows" (Oliver, 2007). In example (4), the word 'been' is a past participle and should therefore indicate that the /s/ contraction is representing 'has', while example (5) ends in a prepositional phrase:

(4) She's been here a while.

(5) She's in the kitchen.

This means of differentiating 'has' and 'is' is helpful most of the time, but the matter is complicated by the fact that existential phrases, or phrases that indicate the reality of some thing being present, are often indicated with the /s/ contraction:

(6) There's a tree in the yard.

These same phrases are not necessarily followed up by a past participle, noun phrase, prepositional phrase, adjective, or an –ing verb. These phrases often include the word ‘there’, and are considered nonreferential or existential.

Referential and nonreferential ‘there’

Generally speaking, referential noun phrases are “distinguishable by properties other than those inherent in the meaning of the expression itself” and they “refer to the entity in question” (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 399). The difference between a referential use of ‘there’ and a nonreferential use can be depicted by comparing example (6) with the following:

(7) There’s where I left my pencil.

Example (6) is nonreferential or existential because it simply means that a tree exists in the yard. In (7) ‘there’ actually carries meaning for the phrase because it is indicating a location of a lost pencil. If ‘there’ carries meaning, it is referential. Additionally, the phrase with referential ‘there’ cannot easily be written in another way, such as:

(7a) Where I left my pencil is there.

However, “nonreferential ‘there’ can be rewritten as [a sentence] with indefinite subjects:

(8) There’s a man standing under that tree.

(9) A man is standing under that tree (Cowan, 2008, p. 139).

Both of these statements are grammatically correct, but in discourse the former is used with high frequency, and it is most commonly followed by some form of the ‘be’ copula, ‘is’ or ‘are’.

Since the word ‘there’ can be used to represent different meanings it is probable that other grammatical issues, such as tense and subject verb agreement, can be used with varying grammatical rules while using the /s/ contraction. Do these grammatical features determine

whether ‘there’ can be contracted with /s/ and if the rules can be bent, when and how?

Subject-Verb Agreement

Agreement, simply put, “is a technical term for the way words or word classes are matched in terms of number (singular or plural), gender (masculine, feminine, and [sometimes] neuter) and person (first, second, or third)” (Peters, 2004, p. 23). According to the rules of agreement, different verb forms shall be used depending on the subject of the phrase. Peters (2004) provides the following examples:

(10) That flower has had its day.

(11) Those flowers have had their day. (2004, p. 23).

The former has a singular subject and takes the third person verb form of ‘have’, which is ‘has’. Meanwhile, ‘flowers’ is plural and requires the plural verb form ‘have’.

The concept of agreement plays a large role in the use of the /s/ contraction. Even if example (11) contained a plural subject that did not end in /s/, such as a collective noun, it would not be correct to use the /s/ contraction. Consider the following:

(12) Those cattle have had their day.

Not only do the rules of agreement affect the verb following the noun, but the pronoun (‘their’) that is used later in the sentence must also remain consistent, as ‘their’ refers to the plural noun ‘cattle’. What happens however, when it is unclear whether the noun is singular or plural?

Some of the most subtle subject categories that complicate agreement are:

- 1 collective nouns (e.g., government, mob)
 - 2 nouns whose reference form ends in s (e.g., economics, Woolworths)
 - 3 indefinite pronouns (e.g., anyone, each)
 - 4 compound subjects (e.g., John and I, neither John nor I, eggs and bacon)
 - 5 complex subjects, including quantifiers (e.g., a book of answers, a total of 20 students)
- (Peters, 2004, p. 23)

For these subject categories it is often correct to choose either a singular or plural verb. Example (13) depicts a singular /s/ contraction that may be chosen for speech economy (it is faster to say, having one less syllable), or it may be chosen to show that the speaker believes the orchestra to be one entity. In (14) the individuality of the members is being stressed.

(13) The orchestra's playing tonight.

(14) The orchestra are playing tonight.

According to the Langscape survey (1998), American respondents indicated that for most terms they preferred using the singular verb, as is used in example (13). On the other hand, commercial businesses or institutional labels (e.g. The Red Cross) elicited a preference for plural verbs (Peters, 1998). Garner (2009) agrees that Americans prefer to use the singular verb, but he stresses that “[T]he main consideration in skillfully handling collective nouns is consistency in the use of a singular or plural verb” (p. 164). If one begins referring to the orchestra as plural, it is not correct to then use the singular ‘is’ or the /s/ contraction.

One last thing to note about subject-verb agreement is that native speakers do not always follow the rules when it comes to nonreferential uses of ‘there’. The ESL textbook *Focus on Grammar I* (Schoenberg & Mauer 2006) tells students, “[d]on’t use a plural noun after *there’s*,” but this does not reflect how it is used in many spoken contexts by native speakers (p. 203). Furthermore, according to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), this subject-verb agreement rules apply to nonreferential ‘there’ in written context, but “native speakers of English often use ‘there’s’ with plural nouns [and] the contraction definitely makes the lack of agreement more acceptable:

(15) There’s too many term papers for this course (p. 449).

The other reason why the /s/ contraction may be acceptable in example (15) is related to

pronunciation. Generally, grammaticality takes precedence, but in cases of spoken nonreferential 'there', pronunciation ease overrides grammaticality. The reduced form of the verb 'are' is not as easy to pronounce as the reduced form of 'is' with nonreferential 'there' because it places two /r/ sounds right next to each other. While (15) may lack subject-verb agreement, it is commonly used. On the other hand, (15a) has subject-verb agreement, but it is rarely used:

(15a) There're too many term papers for this course.

In summary, the rules of subject-verb agreement generally must be followed, but in the cases of spoken nonreferential 'there' and with several subject categories, such as collective nouns, it is possible to choose a plural verb or a singular verb. The singular verb may even be more common and is more acceptable when it is used as a contraction in these cases; however, the singular verb cannot be spoken if a contraction is not used.

Tense

Just as verbs must agree with their subjects by changing form, they must also follow the rules of tense. In most textbooks, English grammar is described as having many tenses, and there are different rules for formulating each tense. However, according to Cowan (2008), "only two [tenses] are expressed in English by inflections on the verb -present and past" and present time is marked with an /s/ added to the third person verb, while past time is marked with an /ed/ ending (p. 350). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) point to a total of 12 "tenses", which can more precisely be described as "12 combinations of tense and aspect" (p. 110).

Aspect, which represents a speaker's view of the action in a statement (Cowan, 2008), makes up the other concepts of 'tense' that English uses, such as combinations of tense with the

perfect aspect, which are represented by 'have'. There are regular and irregular spellings that mark verbs for tense and the copula 'be' takes an irregular spelling. 'Is', 'am' and 'are' all represent the present tense, while 'was' and 'were' are used for past tense. The only grammatical /s/ contractions are for the third person present tense forms of 'be' and 'have'. Therefore, the rules of subject-verb agreement indicate that the /s/ contraction must be used for only singular subjects and the rules of tense indicate that it must represent a perfect or a present tense verb.

Copula and auxiliary 'be'

The copula 'be' has two functions. It can be an auxiliary verb or a copula, as is shown in the following examples from Celce-Murcia and Freeman (1999):

(16) Copula: John is a teacher.

(17) Auxiliary: John is talking to Susan (p. 53).

The difference between the two is that the function of the copula is to equate the subject of the sentence to the object or adjective in the predicate; the copula is the main verb in the sentence. The auxiliary 'be' is not the main verb, but a helping verb in the sentence; it is grammatically required to create the present progressive tense when combined with another verb.

Consider the following examples from Azar (1999), where (18) is a copula and (19) is an auxiliary:

(18) Ann is sick today.

(19) Sue is being foolish (p. 17).

When the copula is used it can equate a subject to an object or to an adjective describing the subject. Example (19) is especially interesting because it uses the same verb as both an auxiliary and a main verb: both are forms of 'be', but the rules of tense require them to stand next to each

other in completely different forms. In spoken English the main verb of a phrase carries more emphasis. It is generally spoken louder, longer, and clearer, so it is more likely that the auxiliary 'be' is reduced to the /s/ contraction. Therefore, example (19) is more likely to be reduced as opposed to (18).

Auxiliary 'have'

'Have' can also function as both a main verb and an auxiliary verb. Badalmenti and Henner-Stanchina (2007) define it in their grammar textbook, saying "[t]he verb 'have' means to own or possess" (p. 66). However, when it is being used to fulfill a tense or aspectual role, it does not carry the same meaning and stress. "Perfect aspect, formed with *have* and the past participle (verb + *-ed*)" says Cowan (2008), "expresses completed action" (p. 367). 'Have' can be used or left out of a phrase to change the tense of a sentence in the following ways:

(20) She skied down that slope.

(21) She has skied down that slope.

(22) She had skied down that slope.

In order, the tense of these phrases is simple past, present perfect, and past perfect. The only viable candidate for the /s/ contraction is (21).

One difference between using 'is' or 'has' as a main verb is that when they are used as the main verb of the sentence, only 'is' can be reduced to the /s/ contraction. Where the copula 'is' merely represents an equal sign, 'has' carries the meaning of possession.

(23) She has it.

(24) She's it.

Example (24) is grammatically incorrect if it is meant to carry the same meaning as (23), but (24)

would be read as correct by anyone who thinks that it is a copula use of 'is'. In other words, it would likely be understood to mean that 'she' and 'it' are being equated.

Ungrammatical uses of the /s/ contraction

Established up to this point are the grammatical features which create a grammatical use of the /s/ contraction. Tense, aspect, and subject-verb agreement are the obvious features that control the grammaticality of all English phrases. In the case of this contraction, nonreferential 'there', 'be', and 'have' also carry distinct rules for spoken grammar. As difficult as it is to succinctly describe all of the features that make this contraction grammatical, it is even more difficult to collect data on all of the ungrammatical uses. Not only can grammar rules be broken, but several combinations of rules can be broken as well.

A corpus search can provide excellent data about how modern English is being used by native speakers; however, precisely because there are so many grammar rules that can be broken, many corpora limit the parameters that can be entered. Contracted speech has not yet been entered into the search limits by creators of two well-known corpora, the *Michigan corpus of academic spoken English, a.k.a. MICASE* (University of Michigan, 2007), and the *Corpus of contemporary American English, a.k.a. COCA* (Davies, M., 2008). Despite these limitations, it is still possible to search for errors of subject-verb agreement, tense, and aspect.

(25) *²So that we is, a voice of the progress, of the people (MICASE, 2007; transcript Id no. SEM545MG083).

(26) *The fact is we have always said from the very start we has always favored separating the criminals from the law-abiding (COCA, 2002; Id no. 19970627).

² *Indicates an ungrammatical construction.

Both of these examples depict subject-verb agreement problems. Example (25) shows a lack of agreement between ‘we’ and ‘is’, which should read ‘we are’; example (26) shows a lack between ‘we’ and ‘has’, which should read ‘we have’. It is not difficult to imagine that these errors would be even easier to make if the utterances were reduced to ‘we’s’ because it is easier to say, but most native speakers are wary of making such an obvious error. This next example demonstrates another subject-verb agreement error, although the verb is an auxiliary here:

(27) *And they is certainly going to be with us sick (COCA, 2002; Id no. 20020930).

It is a plausible hypothesis to state that where these grammar rules are being broken with the full form of the verb ‘is’, they may also be broken with the reduced form of ‘is’: the /s/ contraction. Looking at the corpora allows one to see exactly which grammar features are likely to be disregarded or unaccounted for by native speakers.

Spoken English Grammar

There is no question that while spoken grammar can often take a less formal appearance and be less restricted by the rules of written grammar, there is an enormous amount of overlap in the realm of grammatical rules for both mediums. McCarthy and Carter (2006) raise an important question about the issue of authority over the use of spoken grammar. They ask: “Who is to be the voice of authority with regard to spoken grammar?” (p. 46). In general, native English speakers shape their own use, which is usually similar to their peers' use and with many written grammar rules, but even though the differences may be narrow, it is important to recognize that there are different norms and rules that apply to spoken grammar. Carter and McCarthy (2006) use the terms “standard” and “non-standard” to describe the gap between written and spoken grammar, saying that “...if we consider ‘standard’ to be a description of the

recurrent spoken usage of adult native speakers [then] what may be considered ‘non-standard’ in writing may well be ‘standard’ in speech” (p. 168).

Taking this gap in standardized language use into account, it is important to remember that speech patterns change much faster than writing patterns. Since speech is not dependent upon publication and approval by “the most highly literate members” of society, it develops several spoken grammars that only apply to the population that is actively using them. The concept of a separate spoken grammar is a relatively new one, and due to the availability of technology, corpora are now being used to provide textual examples of spoken English. However, the influence of written prescriptive grammar is still very prevalent in schools and textbooks for native and non-native speakers.

Aitchison's book *Language change: progress or decay?* (2001) highlights various attempts over the last few centuries to purify and write down grammar rules that were meant to apply equally to written and spoken forms. On the contrary, Aitchison points to a need for change in both mediums by citing an example of adapting the collective noun 'media' so that it may take a singular verb. Aitchison claims that “[t]o an impartial observer, the treatment of *media* as a singular noun might seem to be an advantage, not a sign of decay. Since most English plurals end in -s, it irons out an exception” (p. 13).

A theoretical question that Aitchison (2001), Carter and McCarthy (2006), and McCarthy and Carter (2006) point to is: To what degree are English speakers able to prescribe their own rules for English use? This may be a question that can only be answered on an individual basis; however, this study will attempt to uncover the patterns of acceptability for the different grammatical features that are involved with using the /s/ contraction. If there is a pattern to the way native speakers rate different phrases with it, then this may indicate that yes, they are able to

prescribe their own rules for how to most effectively use the /s/ contraction.

Research Questions

Focusing on four grammatical features which affect the /s/ contraction, including tense, singularity versus plurality, use of ‘be’ versus ‘have’, and uses of ‘there’, this study attempts to produce acceptability ratings for a set of phrases using the /s/ contraction. These ratings should reflect native speakers’ perceptions of how spoken language should be formed. Now that the grammatical features have been described, the rest of this paper will be dedicated to the survey of native English speakers. By empirically analyzing the phrases contained in the survey, and the participants’ responses to the uses of the /s/ contraction in those phrases, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: Is there a pattern of agreement among survey participants about which statements with the /s/ contraction are perceived as grammatically correct or grammatically unacceptable?

RQ2: Which grammatical features of the /s/ contraction do survey participants have a low level of agreement about?

Method

Participants

The survey was first piloted with a group of approximately six university students studying to become English as a second language instructors. This initial group provided feedback on the survey instructions, questions, and the ease of judging the survey statements. The final version of the survey was completed by forty-two native English speakers. Most of them were associated with the University of Minnesota and were well-educated. Their answers

to the first three questions on the survey indicated that they were generally careful about their use of correct grammar with family and friends, professional contacts, and with non-native speakers as well (see Appendix A). Also, more than half of the participants were ESL instructors with a graduate degree, and only 12% lacked proficiency in a second language (see Appendix B).

Instrument

The survey consisted of twenty-four statements, all but one of which contained use of the contracted /s/ form (see Appendix C). The statements were created to test the acceptability of the contracted /s/ using present and past tenses, plural and singular subjects, different verbs ('be' or 'have'), and with the word *there* (referential or nonreferential). In order to create the surveys, each grammatical feature was considered, and when possible the grammar rules that pertained to it were both followed and broken in survey statements. For example, /s/ can represent 'is' in a correct way (#10) with subject-verb agreement, and in an incorrect way (#27):

(#10) *What if she's not willing to do it?*

(#27) *I's just trying to say you oughtta try again.*

There are statements contracting /s/ with various nouns and pronouns, as well as in past tense. Additionally, there are examples of 'has' being reduced to the /s/ contraction with third person nouns, with pronouns, with 'there', and as both an auxiliary (#22) and main verb (#16):

(#22) *He said that he's going to fix it, but he never did.*

(#16) *She's no idea what to wish for.*

The order of the statements was randomized so that respondents could not detect which grammatical feature was being tested and quite often, it was impossible to isolate just one grammatical feature at a time.

Figure 1 shows how many times each feature was tested in the twenty-four statements. The numbers correspond to the statements in the survey (see Appendix C). Each row lists four separate features, and each number can only be found in one row per column. The first column shows which statements were written in the present tense versus the past tense. The number of the statement can only be found in one of these categories, and it may be found in each column one time with the exception of the last column, nonreferential ‘there’ versus referential ‘there’. For example, statement #11 contains a phrase that is a past tense form of ‘have’, which is also singular and includes nonreferential ‘there’.

Figure 1- Features Tested

Present Tense – 18 Statements	‘Be’ – 18 Statements	Singular Subject – 16 Statements	Nonreferential There- 6 Statements
#7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29	#7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30	#8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 25, 27, 30	#9, 11, 15, 18, 26, 29
Past Tense – 6 Statements	‘Have’ – 6 Statements	Plural Subject – 8 Statements	Referential There – 1 Statement
#11, 18, 20, 22, 23, 27, 30	#11, 12, 16, 21, 24, 28	#7, 9, 19, 23, 24, 26, 28, 29	#25

Additionally, each statement was followed by a list of possible ratings. The instructions to the survey explain that the respondents should select a rating without dwelling on the statement for too long. By selecting A) Correct, respondents were identifying the use of the /s/ contraction as grammatical; B) Acceptable means that the statement was not perceived to be prescriptively correct, but it was still appropriate to use in spoken English. Additionally, C) Somewhat Acceptable and D) Unacceptable were used when respondents perceived the statements to be ungrammatical enough that they would either rarely or never be spoken.

Participants were also asked to provide an explanation for a rating of D) Unacceptable.

Data collection

After this survey was piloted, it was sent out via email to more than one hundred potential respondents, and fifty people responded. The respondents were asked to copy the survey, fill it out electronically, save a copy, and send it back via email within two weeks. The directions for completing the survey itself (see Appendix B) described how respondents should rate only the use of the /s/ contractions, printed in italics, using their first reaction. It was also recommended that they read the statements out loud so that they could judge the written statements as if they were spoken. It was expected that the survey took approximately fifteen minutes for most to complete, based on the amount of time that the pilot participants spent completing the survey. In the email participants were informed that the survey results would remain anonymous and the only insight that they had into what the survey was testing was a brief statement that it would be used to study a linguistic feature of native English use. After the attachments were returned, eight surveys had to be discarded because they had incomplete answers, leaving a total of forty-two surveys for data analysis.

Data analysis

Prior to answering the research questions, the different features, identified in Figure 1, had to be listed for each statement. For example, was the /s/ contraction used to represent a present tense verb or a past tense verb, singular noun or plural noun, and so on. This list was then compared to the ratings of acceptability that the participants gave to the statements to answer *RQ1*. They had the option of rating the use of the contracted /s/ for each of the statements (see Appendix C) by selecting from the ratings from correct to unacceptable. Since

the participants simply marked one of four ratings for each statement, it was logical to convert each rating, A) Correct-D) Unacceptable to a numerical value (4-1). If an item was rated as A) Correct, it received a value of 4. B) Acceptable received a 3, and so on. The mean score for each item was calculated by multiplying each numerical rate by the number of participants. All of these rates were then added together and divided by the total number of participants (n = 42). These rates represent either high-agreement for grammaticality or correctness (3.5-4), high-agreement for ungrammaticality (1-1.5), or low-agreement (2-3).

Findings

RQ1: Is there a pattern of agreement among survey participants about which statements with the /s/ contraction are perceived as grammatically correct or grammatically unacceptable?

This question may be answered by looking at three main grammatical features that affect the perceived acceptability of the statements. These features include: singularity, tense, and use of nonreferential ‘there’.

Singularity vs. plurality

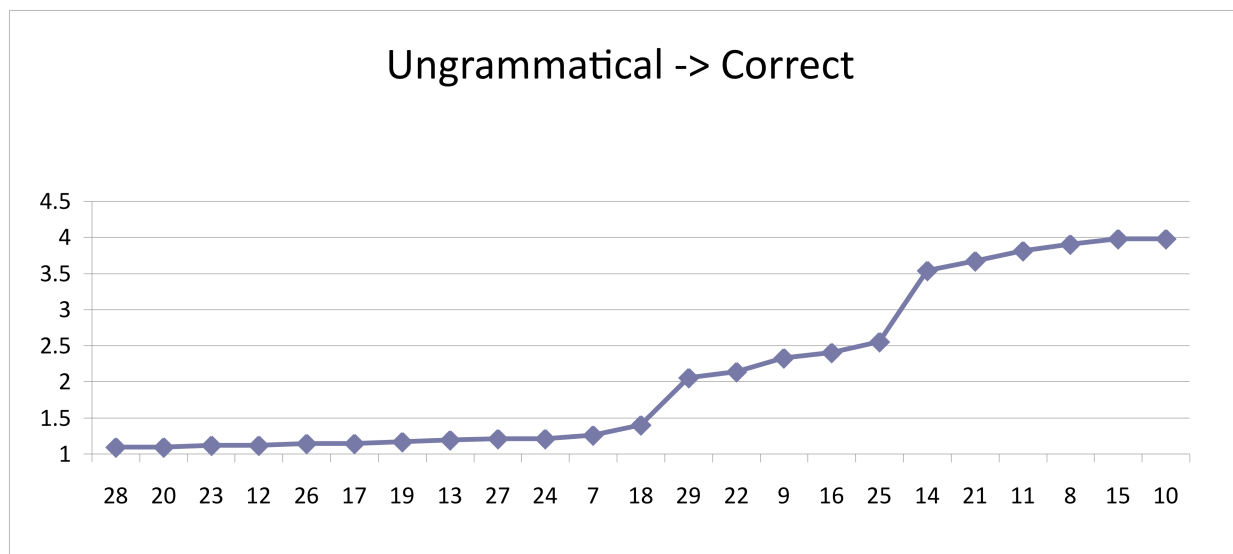
In Figure 2, the opinions of the participants clearly show that there are six cases where the /s/ contraction is widely judged as correct, and others where it is clearly judged as unacceptable for spoken English³.

First, in the six statements that were judged to be grammatically correct with high-agreement, singularity is a common factor. Statements #8, 10, and 21 (Appendix D) contract

³ Survey statement #30 produced inconclusive results because it was found that the tense of the statement is ambiguous. Present or past tense could be indicated in the statement ‘Kenny’s responsible for the crash yesterday.’

singular subjects with either 'is' or 'has'. Also, #11 and 15 are examples of non-referential 'there', but the subjects are singular and they are contracted with 'is' and 'has', respectively. In statement #14 a collective noun is contracted with /s/ and this may show that the participants are judging that collective (majority's) as a singular subject. If it is judged as a plural subject, then it stands alone as the only plural in the category of high-agreement for correctness.

Figure 2- Acceptability Ratings



x-axis: Statement numbers 7-29, arranged in order of grammaticality ratings

y-axis: Mean grammaticality response (4.0 = Correct; 1.0 = Unacceptable)

Tense

In addition to singularity, tense seems to be associated with correctness. All of these contractions represent either simple present tense verbs or aspectual variations of the present tense. #11 and 21 use the present-perfect tense and #14 uses present progressive. It is possible to conclude that having aspectual variations of the present tense and/or singular subjects indicates that the /s/ contraction is grammatically correct. The dichotomy between choosing 'is' or 'has' does not seem to affect the respondents' ratings of the grammaticality of the statements.

Next, in looking at the twelve statements that indicate high agreement about their

unacceptability, it is only possible to isolate tense as a common denominator. None of the statements were considered correct if they contained the /s/ contraction to represent the past tense verb 'was'. In fact, four out of the five uses of 'was' as a contraction had high agreement for unacceptability. Statement #22, which will be addressed by *RQ2*, was the only one that had some disagreement.

Past tense seems to be the only tense that indicates unacceptability. The other statements that represent high agreement for unacceptability contain other tenses and examples of both singular and plural subjects. For these, the only common denominator seems to be that there is no subject-verb agreement. In other words, either 'is' or 'has' have been contracted with subjects that are not third person singular. Contracted uses of 'I', 'you', 'we', or 'they' with /s/ are considered to be unacceptable by all participants. On the survey form (Appendix C), half of the participants who marked 'D' for unacceptability provided an explanation for this, saying that the lack of subject-verb agreement made the statements incorrect. In these cases, using 'are' or 'have' instead of 'is' or 'has' would solve the subject-verb agreement problem. Likewise, the participants who gave an explanation for the unacceptable contractions with 'was' (#18, 20, 23, 27) stated that the lack of subject-verb agreement was problematic.

Nonreferential 'there'

Before looking more closely at the nonreferential 'there' examples that lacked agreement (#9 and 29), it is important to note that there are examples of this contraction ('there's') that had high agreement for correctness. The difference between these ratings is that the ones with high agreement contained singular subjects, and the ones with low agreement contained plural subjects. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), it is acceptable to use this /s/

contraction for plural subjects with nonreferential 'there' in spoken language. However, it is possible that since this is only acceptable in spoken form, and the survey itself was written, half of the participants rated the lack of a plural verb as unacceptable or somewhat acceptable. On the other hand, #26 contains the full-form of the phrase 'there is', and participants who accepted the contracted form could clearly see that this was unacceptable.

RQ2: Which grammatical features of the /s/ contraction do survey participants have a low-level of agreement about?

The participants rated five of the items with a mean acceptability rating approximately 2-2.5, which indicates that these statements (#9, 16, 22, 25, 29) have grammatical features that native speakers are ambiguous about. This ambiguity may stem from a lack of knowledge about the correctness of these features, or it may indicate that the participants do not agree about the grammar and are unable to consider the issue of pronunciation ease for these items.

Statements #9 and 29 both contain nonreferential contractions of 'there' with the singular, present tense verb 'is':

(#9) *Uh, there's eighteen deaths per one-hundred live births.*

(#29) *There's books piled to the ceiling.*

Statement #25 is also a contraction of 'there' with the singular present tense verb 'is', but it is referential.

(#25) *She told me that there's where we should put our coats.*

However, this statement uses 'there' referentially and, as is the case with #22, it is reported speech. In both cases the statements are reporting on previous speech acts:

(#22) *He said that he's going to fix it, but he never did.*

The final example in this category contains subject-verb agreement just like #22, but the verb that is represented by /s/ is not 'is' or 'was', it is the verb 'has':

(#16) *She's no idea what to wish for.*

Discussion

Participants in this study were able to reach high-agreement about the correctness of /s/ contraction statements, which contained present tense, singular contractions of 'is' or 'has'. Similarly, the participants seemed to be able to easily pick out unacceptable statements when they contained contractions with the past tense verb 'was' or when they lacked subject-verb agreement. The gray area that causes disagreement appears to be the uses of the /s/ contraction with some instances of 'there', as a replacement for the third person verb 'has', and also for some instances of reported speech.

The cases of reported speech in statements #22 and 25 show that these items may be viewed in two different ways. Why would participants disagree about the grammaticality of these statements? One theory is that those who gave them a higher rating saw these clauses as quotations, rather than paraphrases of previous speech acts. #25 uses 'there' referentially so it is grammatically correct, but if the participants saw this statement as a paraphrase using 'was' rather than 'is', it seems logical that they would rank this as unacceptable. However, not all of the participants indicated their explanation for this and those who did considered the problem to be with the subject 'there'. One person rephrased the statement saying "She told me that we should put our coats there" and several other participants replaced 'There is' with 'That is'. Some participants who rated #25 as correct, ranked #22 as unacceptable, pointing out that the this statement contained a contraction of 'was' which is incorrect. If it was viewed as a quote, then

using the present tense 'is' becomes acceptable. Here the disagreement is present because these statements are decontextualized and therefore, the participants took a different point of view about what the statement's purpose was.

Additionally, it is possible that not only the type, but also the number of errors or verbs in a statement changed the participants' view of its grammaticality. For example, in #16, /s/ is being used to represent the contraction of a singular, third-person subject with 'has', using the present perfect tense.

(#16) *She's no idea what to wish for.*

In #21 the same this is true, but 'has' is used as an auxiliary verb:

(#21) *When Maria's got an idea, you'd better get out of the way!*

It is possible that some of the participants were judging the lack of a second verb in #16 as unacceptable, leading to the conclusion that 'has' may not be reduced to /s/ when it is the main verb in a sentence. 'Has' may only be reduced to /s/ when it is performing an auxiliary function or when it is combined with nonreferential 'there'.

Finally, it is possible that all of the participants had a highly vested interest in grammaticality since they indicated in questions 1-3 of the survey (see Appendix A) that they were generally very careful about their use of correct grammar. Some of the participants who did not identify as ESL instructors were university students as well. However, even for this highly educated group, some areas of grammaticality in the English language are still quite disputable, and may be subject to context and point of view.

Limitations

In Figure 2, which shows that for this group of participants, only a small number of uses

of the /s/ contraction have ambiguous grammaticality. This study could be improved by surveying a larger number of English speakers, using a larger variety of statements using the /s/ contraction, as well as by altering the survey environment.

This survey was able to control for the type of participants that were involved, namely highly-educated, Midwestern-American native speakers of English. It would be interesting to test whether their opinions are shared by other groups of native speakers. Other levels of education could be tested, as well as other regional groups. If a large-scale survey was done, it may be interesting to look at how native speakers of all ages, regions, and backgrounds would respond to these questions. It was useful and logical to limit the participant pool for this research, but it is difficult to make the case that their opinions represent everyone with a similar background because there were only 42 participants.

Additionally, it would be worthwhile to involve non-native speakers of English or self-identified bi-dialectal participants since most speakers of English are not native speakers (as defined by this survey). The 42 participants involved in this study do not represent all speakers of English and those people who have learned English as a second language or as one of two first languages would likely provide a different perspective on the grammaticality of these statements. It would even be worthwhile to compare the responses of native speakers with these two other groups to discover if there are any differences of opinion relating to grammatical acceptance.

The variables that were tested include different tenses, the verb that /s/ represents ('be' versus 'have'), or singularity versus plurality. In some cases participants indicated which of these aspects caused the use of the contracted /s/ form to be unacceptable, but some sentences had more than one error. Without collecting feedback about each response, whether correct or not, it is difficult to reach an absolute conclusion about which of these variables has the greatest

influence on acceptability. The context of the entire sentence, which was absent from this study, may play a role. One suggestion that would remedy this limitation would be to use more sentences with the same tense, but with variations on the plurality of the subjects. If each variable were more carefully controlled, provided with a context, and repeated, a more persuasive conclusion could be made.

Additionally, it would be beneficial to conduct the survey in a less decontextualized setting. An interview setting, for example, would allow participants to hear and verbally judge the sentences. This would require a shorter response time and would narrow the chances that the participant would use their heightened literacy skills to judge use, as it is possible for them to do in a written survey. An interview could also allow them to provide explanations about why they judged each example as correct, acceptable, somewhat acceptable, or unacceptable. However, even if such an interview were done, it is important to remember that these are still decontextualized examples. The results are simply showing judgments of examples of the contracted /s/ form, not actual use.

One way to test actual use could be by collecting and transcribing every instance of the contracted /s/ for each participant over a period of time to determine which variables they consider acceptable in their own speech. This process would be lengthy. An additional solution would be to utilize a digital voice tool to record an uninterrupted dialogue containing various uses of the /s/ contraction. Asking participants to base their acceptability judgments on a listening exercise would allow them to comment only on the cases of the /s/ contraction that they can hear. They would not be allowed to study the written grammar and the listening task would be contextualized, rather than separated into unrelated sentences.

Future researchers looking for patterns of acceptability for contractions with /s/ would

need to consider the participants and the variables on a larger scale. Pinpointing who is to be studied and adding more sentences with a context are just two ways to adapt this survey. Some of the other variables that were not considered in this study are: use of pronouns versus nouns, question versus statement format, and location of the contraction in the sentence. It is pertinent to keep in mind that there is likely to be a difference between how people speak and how they report on their own speech patterns. Similarly, ESL instructors are likely to use contractions of /s/ in a different manner than they teach them, and each native speaker may vacillate in how they use or judge the acceptability of these forms.

Implications for Teaching

In an ESL classroom, the use of contractions is generally only discussed in brief. However, for non-native speakers who are wishing to use English in a native-like manner, it is important to consider just how native speakers use or avoid using the /s/ contraction. For example, non-native speakers may wish to know that by choosing not to use it in their speech at certain times, they may be adding stress on the verb. Also, there are different verbs that can be replaced with this contraction, such as 'has' or 'is'. The grammatical and meaning differences of referential and nonreferential 'there' should be explained so that they are aware that the grammar for these forms can vary from spoken to written forms.

Additionally, when the /s/ contraction is used in an ungrammatical way by other speakers, non-native speakers may want to be able to detect this. Native speakers are often able to bend the rules of grammar for style and expression, but this is difficult for ESL students. It may take years of ESL training for them to be able to bend the rules of grammar as a means of expression, if this is ever possible, but the ability to detect such use is a teachable concept.

One further implication for the English classroom relates to the concept of English as an international language. Mackay (2002) makes the argument that since English can be considered an international language, the teaching of English should be guided in this manner. Mackay (2002) also addresses the difficulty of defining the native speaker as well as the existence of “nativized” varieties of English; therefore, this grammatical issue should be judged by all speakers of English before a formal lesson on the /s/ contraction can be developed. The issue may be raised in any English classroom, but the English language learner should be made aware that there are no prescriptive rules that fully address use of the /s/ contraction.

Conclusion

This set of contractions was judged by a group of people who self-identified as having a heightened awareness of English grammar. Some of the common grammatical features resulting in high agreement about statement correctness were use of the present tense 'be', subject-verb agreement, and singularity of subject. Participants also demonstrated high agreement for judging the reduced form of 'was' and lack of subject-verb agreement as unacceptable.

In everyday communication, these participants are able to make quick decisions about how grammatically correct they would like to be given the context of the situation. The most interesting finding is that in areas of low agreement, including: reported speech, contractions of 'there is' with plural subjects, and the reduction of 'has' when it is the main verb in a sentence. The statements that contained these features represent a set of contracted forms that are commonly spoken in a less grammatical form than they are written in. This may indicate a change in the English language or an area that these participants have not critically assessed grammatically. The contracted /s/ form is used to economize spoken English and the more a

form is used, the more likely it is to be accepted.

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Appendix A

Questions 1-6 from Acceptability Survey

	A) Very careful- I make a conscious effort to use correct grammar.	B) Somewhat careful- I usually use correct grammar, but in some cases I don't worry about it.	C) Not very careful- I don't worry about using correct grammar. I just say what comes to mind.	D) I use a lot of slang and rarely try to use correct grammar.
1. How careful are you about using correct grammar when you are speaking with your friends or family?	15 (36%)	19 (45%)	8 (19%)	-
2. How careful are you about using correct grammar when you are speaking in a professional environment (i.e. at work or in the classroom)?	30 (71%)	12 (29%)	-	-
3. How careful are you about using correct grammar when you know that you are speaking to a non-native speaker of English?	20 (48%)	21 (50%)	1 (2%)	-

Appendix B

Questions 4-6 from Acceptability Survey

4. What is your role (relating to English Language Instruction or another career)? Circle all that apply.			
ESL Instructor: 26 (62%)		University Student, Educator of a subject other than ESL, Other: 16 (38%)	
5. What is the highest level of education that you have completed or are in the process of completing?			
Some College: 1 (2%)		Bachelor's Degree: 1 (2%)	Graduate Degree: 40 (95%)
6. How many languages do you speak productively? (I am defining productive as being able to carry-on at least a five minute conversation with a native speaker.)			
Only English: 5 (12%)	English and one other language: 24 (57%)	English and two other languages: 10 (24%)	English and three or more languages: 3 (7%)

Directions: The rest of the questions should be answered in order of acceptability. Acceptability means that, regardless of the grammatical correctness of each example, you would make a similar statement in most environments; or you would not pay attention to the grammatical errors if you heard someone make this statement in most environments. The structure that you are rating is the use of the *contracted 's* and it will be in *Italic* font. It may help you to read the statements outloud. Please rate each use of the *contracted 's* with your honest, gut-reaction based on the following scale:

- A) Correct- There are no errors with the *contracted 's*.
 - B) Acceptable- There may be a grammatical error, but you would feel comfortable using the example or would not be bothered by hearing someone else use it.
 - C) Somewhat Acceptable- You notice the grammatical error easily, but could imagine yourself using this example occasionally or would not be bothered hearing it in a relaxed environment.
 - D) Unacceptable- The use of the *contracted 's* is clearly incorrect and you would only use it or expect to hear it in an environment where everyone is choosing the incorrect grammatical form for stylistic purposes. Here I will ask you to provide a short explanation about why this is incorrect: _____
- (This could be a grammar rule or any other reason why you find this structure unacceptable.)

Appendix C

Questions 7-30 from Acceptability Survey

7. Ya think that when *we's* happy, it shows?

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

8. *John's* in the garden every night.

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

9. Uh, *there's* eighteen deaths per one-hundred live births.

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

10. What if *she's* not willing to do it?

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

11. *There's* been talk about getting a new leader.

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

12. What do you do in the morning after *you's* been working all night?

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

13. At times, *I's* got my reasons.

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

- C) Somewhat Acceptable
D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____
14. The *majority's* going to win the vote.
A) Correct
B) Acceptable
C) Somewhat Acceptable
D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____
15. *There's* a good reason for it.
A) Correct
B) Acceptable
C) Somewhat Acceptable
D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____
16. *She's* no idea what to wish for.
A) Correct
B) Acceptable
C) Somewhat Acceptable
D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____
17. *You's* comin to the party, right?
A) Correct
B) Acceptable
C) Somewhat Acceptable
D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____
18. It used to be that *there's* a bell on top of the school house.
A) Correct
B) Acceptable
C) Somewhat Acceptable
D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____
19. She said that *they's* the only ones who can fix it.
A) Correct
B) Acceptable
C) Somewhat Acceptable
D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____
20. *You's* really funny yesterday!
A) Correct
B) Acceptable
C) Somewhat Acceptable
D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

21. When *Maria's* got an idea, you'd better get out of the way!

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

22. He said that *he's* going to fix it, but he never did.

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

23. *We's* going about sixty when the “check engine” light came on.

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

24. Wherever *they's* got friends, we can expect some help.

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

25. She told me that *there's* where we should put our coats.

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

26. *There is* crumbs on every piece of furniture.

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

27. *I's* just trying to say you oughtta try again.

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

28. What if *we's* been played for a bunch of fools?

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

29. *There's* books piled to the ceiling.

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

30. *Kenny's* responsible for the crash yesterday.

A) Correct

B) Acceptable

C) Somewhat Acceptable

D) Unacceptable- Explanation: _____

Appendix D

Survey Statements (in order of grammaticality ranking: Correct= 4.0; Unacceptable= 1.0)

Grammatical Features/Rank

High-Agreement, Correct

10. What if <i>she's</i> not willing to do it?	present-progressive singular BE auxiliary	3.98
15. <i>There's</i> a good reason for it.	present singular BE copula	3.98
8. <i>John's</i> in the garden every night.	present singular BE copula	3.90
11. <i>There's</i> been talk about getting a new leader.	present-perfect singular BE copula	3.81
21. When <i>Maria's</i> got an idea, you'd better get out of the way!	present-perfect singular HAVE auxiliary	3.67
14. The <i>majority's</i> going to win the vote.	present singular BE auxiliary	3.54

Low-Agreement, Somewhat Acceptable/Acceptable

25. She told me that <i>there's</i> where we should put our coats.	present/past singular BE copula	2.55
16. <i>She's</i> no idea what to wish for.	present singular HAVE main verb	2.40
9. Uh, <i>there's</i> eighteen deaths per one-hundred live births.	present plural BE copula	2.33
22. He said that <i>he's</i> going to fix it, but he never did.	present/past singular BE auxiliary	2.14
29. <i>There's</i> books piled to the ceiling.	present plural BE copula	2.05

High-Agreement, Unacceptable

18. It used to be that <i>there's</i> a bell on top of the school house.	past singular BE copula	1.40
7. Ya think that when <i>we's</i> happy, it shows?	present plural BE copula	1.26
24. Wherever <i>they's</i> got friends, we can expect some help.	present-perfect plural HAVE auxiliary	1.21
27. <i>I's</i> just trying to say you oughtta try again.	past singular BE auxiliary	1.21
13. At times, <i>I's</i> got my reasons.	present singular HAVE auxiliary	1.19
19. She said that <i>they's</i> the only ones who can fix it.	present/past plural BE copula	1.17
17. <i>You's</i> comin to the party, right?	present singular BE auxiliary	1.14
26. <i>There is</i> crumbs on every piece of furniture.	present singular BE copula	1.14
12. What do you do in the morning after <i>you's</i> been working all night?	present-perfect singular HAVE auxiliary	1.12
23. <i>We's</i> going about sixty when the “check engine” light came on.	past plural BE auxiliary	1.12
20. <i>You's</i> really funny yesterday!	past singular BE copula	1.09
28. What if <i>we's</i> been played for a bunch of fools?	present-perfect plural HAVE auxiliary	1.09

Eliminated

30. <i>Kenny's</i> responsible for the crash yesterday.	present/past singular BE copula
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